

August 20, 1999

Mr. Mark Nixon
Editorial Page Editor
Lansing State Journal
120 East Lenawee Street
Lansing, Michigan 48919

Dear Mr. Nixon:

On August 15, you ran an editorial in follow up to an article by Paul Egan on an audit of the Family Independence Agency's (FIA) computer systems. While FIA does not dispute the facts mentioned in the audit, we do take issue with some of the conclusions drawn by the auditors; primarily that FIA did not take actions to manage the project.

FIA took actions both internally and with the contractor for our major systems effort, ASSIST, which was the focus of the audit. To keep the system on track, project managers, on both the contractor and FIA side, were replaced. The project management was stabilized in 1996. The contract was amended several times as a result of missed dates and deliverables by the contractor and penalties were imposed. A top level chief information officer was hired by FIA in 1997 and solidified our efforts to accomplish weekly systems meetings with the vendor, develop project tracking and secure specialized software to monitor progress. These major efforts were only mentioned in passing by the audit.

The audit, and your article, fail to acknowledge that the federal requirement to develop the ASSIST program predated both the Michigan and federal welfare reform. With the 1996 changes in the federal welfare laws came the need to change the software for ASSIST. At the time ASSIST was initially developed, no one could have predicted the magnitude of the new federal reporting requirements and the impact they would have on the federally mandated system that FIA contracted for in 1993.

Technically, it is correct to say that ASSIST does an estimated 20 percent of what FIA originally intended it to do. But what is not said is that the changes to welfare laws, technology and federal reporting requirements so drastically changed the state's needs, that many of the original, intended functions no longer made sense. What FIA has today is a computer platform which will allow the agency to manage future system needs of our constantly changing welfare system.

The great difficulty in attempting to build a large comprehensive computer system, as required of us by the federal government, is that it can never be finished. Change is part of our world today; the change as a result of welfare reform has been unprecedented in the history of our nation.

The fact that we have over 11,000 PC work stations in place across this state; continuously updated on-line manuals for workers at their desk-tops; an on-line registration system that processes over 1 million transactions a day, and the foundation on which future needs can be accommodated, is a strong testament to the fact that FIA did pay attention, did manage, and did all this at the same time we became a national leader in welfare reform.

Neither the Auditor's report nor the Lansing State Journal articles acknowledge that much of the systems costs incurred were for computer hardware, software and networking costs over several years that we would have incurred even in the absence of ASSIST.

Change is difficult and can even be painful to accept, but change is manageable. I pledge that FIA will continue to manage ASSIST and all other computer systems we undertake in a professional and business like manner within the constraints in which we must operate. Taxpayers deserve no less than that from us.

Sincerely,

Douglas E. Howard